

YOU ARE THE CURRICULUM: PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION OF EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE WITH IMPACT

In the globalized and technological world in which we now live, school leaders must be prepared to engage in complex and interdependent systems. Hierarchical power and authority will not provide the leader with the capacity to challenge people and systems to adapt and change to the emerging needs of students from differing social, political, and cultural contexts. Principals require a model of leadership that transcends epistemological boundaries to nurture learning organizations that produce students who are equipped to engage in the global knowledge economy and to participate as citizens of the world. This article presents participant perspectives of a model of leadership development that has resulted in over 60% of graduates obtaining school or district leadership positions within two years of program completion and recognition by the Wallace Foundation as a recipient of their 2011 funding program aimed at improving the pipeline to the principalship.

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Rationale

An inquiry-based approach to the preparation of school leaders requires learning through self-reflection, group inquiry and leadership prac-

tice within the organization. Leadership preparation must be more than transmission of knowledge of a field; it must challenge existing values, critically examine actions and be grounded in the complexity of practice. Aspiring leaders need to learn the judgment and skill needed to challenge people and systems toward maximizing opportunities for all children. Participant responses reveal a spiraling up process of growth resulting from this approach toward leadership learning. The larger epistemological impact suggests that such a shift in notions of self allows for disruption of the hegemonic discourse, which in turn allows for the interruption of leadership that creates cultures of replication of the dominant power structures within and through schools.

Review of Literature

University-based principal preparation has historically consisted of models where program participants learn theories and methods within university settings that they are then expected to apply within schools (Murphy, 1992; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004). These models have been criticized and deemed ineffective by those within and outside of the field (Hess, 2003; Levine, 2005; McCarthy, 1999; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009; Murphy, 2002; Murphy & Forsyth, 1999). However, the field of preparing school leaders has gained legitimacy due to research that demonstrates the connection between the quality and effectiveness of school leader impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Research has shown the connections between leadership preparation and the practice of the principal (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009) and the relationship between principal preparation and school outcomes (Braun, Gable & Kite, 2008; Martorell, Heaton, Gates, & Hamilton, 2010; Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

This research on the need and quality of school leadership preparation heightens the need to examine the work of and experiences of participants within successful university-based principal preparation programs. The following article describes the theoretical framework, values, knowledge base and pedagogy of a principal preparation program that grew from a university-district collaboration forged to prepare adaptive leaders capable of facilitating second order change. From 2003–2007, over 130 aspiring principals have graduated from the program; of these graduates, 64 are currently serving as principals or assistant principals within the district.

The program is evaluated annually by both the university and the district through surveys and interviews of current students and program graduates, interviews with district administrators and reviews of student work. The program has been evaluated by both local and national evaluators and consistently scores higher, and is proven to be more effective than similar principal preparation programs around the country, particularly stronger than similar programs in the areas of leading learning content and

active student-centered instruction (Orr, 2011). Participants report that the program taught them how to be leaders in setting vision, promoting ethics, encouraging student learning, helping the district build its capacity and engaging with parents and community members.

The program addressed in this study builds experiences for participants through the interaction of self, group and organizational learning based on theories of action science, systems, change and culture (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Freire, 1972; Senge, 1990; and Wheatley, 2001). This integration of content and context provided a platform for aspiring principals to not only learn knowledge and skills but also develop dispositions and exercise judgment as they learn how to lead and promote social change. The program is based on equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995) and an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

The instructional processes and practices disrupt the conventional power dynamics of academic settings. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) use the phrase “recasting teaching” (p. 108) to describe how an inquiry stance changes teaching within university culture. This recasting includes reinventing pedagogy, content and outcomes as inquiry. In practice this means that courses become places where faculty and students generate and investigate questions, collaboratively construct knowledge, produce uncertainty and challenge assumptions. The contextual knowledge and perspectives of the program participants becomes the foreground of the courses rather than the subtext. The students and their experiences become the curriculum of the program and classes become labs where aspiring principals publicly share their thinking, assumptions, experiences, successes and failures and open themselves and their practices to inquiry and analysis. This integration of practice and inquiry promotes knowledge and theory production and blurs the boundaries between theory and practice—researcher and practitioner and faculty and student. The learning and inquiry process becomes generative and models the work of an effective leader who continuously gathers data, builds relationships and adjusts practice rather than blindly implements “best practices” and policy. The inquiry process allows participants to learn content and skills within an authentic context to explore multiple courses of action and activate leadership for social change.

Methodology

The purpose of this article is to share the voices of participants within this successful model of leadership development that utilizes an inquiry-based approach through the progressive interactions of self, group and organization. Narrative inquiry provides a way of understanding experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry is essentially about discourse and

interpretation from those who have lived an experience. The stories that emanate from experience reveal the things that matter and persist. This interpretive inquiry connects the experiences of the participants with the content of the program as a means to identify the practices with impact.

This study began with a request to the 64 program graduates serving as school leaders to participate in a study designed to document the pedagogical practices that have impacted their leadership. All program graduates received an email requesting them to submit stories about how one of the program practices experiences made a difference in their leadership. Twenty program graduates responded with descriptions of how they have connected their learning from the program to their leadership. However, the descriptions did not yield rich stories, so I scheduled small group meetings with graduates so they could enter into a dialogue about their experiences with the hope that stories would emerge. Hosting dialogue sessions allowed the graduates to talk freely and openly to each other about their experiences without the intrusion of a researcher asking questions.

These dialogues were audio-taped and the content was transcribed. The data were analyzed to discern categories and themes through open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Trustworthiness of the data was assured through an audit trail, member-checks, and peer-debriefing.

Findings

Traditional processes in university courses include reading and writing assignments, lectures, discussions, etc. to meet pre-established course outcomes and standards. These processes do not often fit with the contextually dependent and organic nature of inquiry pedagogy. Dialogues with program graduates revealed distinct elements and processes that provided definition to the recasting of teaching through inquiry pedagogy. The following is a sample dialogue of three program graduates in three different cohorts (Joe—2008, current assistant principal at a middle school; Terry—2011, current principal at an elementary school; and Shelley—2004, former elementary principal, now district administrator).

Shelley: I never wanted to be a principal. I remember thinking at the retreat that I would never be able to do this job. I never felt so inadequate in my life.

Joe: Yeah. That retreat really shook me up. It was amazing that so many different people were able to come together and help each other. I really learned how much I didn't know.

Terry: I was really new to the district and didn't know anyone, but the openness and stories really helped me understand the district culture.

Shelley: Remember the Organizational Diagnosis? I don't know what I would have done my first year without that notebook. Every time I was stuck, I pulled it out and found some strategies, questions or direction.

Joe: Yeah, the organizational diagnosis really helped solidify all the areas to look at within a school. It helped me know how to prioritize and ask questions. I think we are in the middle of a movement in our district. Leaders are willing to have courageous conversations.

Shelley: I think the movement is starting, but when I graduated from the program (2004) I felt like a fish out of water. I remember going to district meetings and thinking how am I ever going to work with these people. At every meeting we learned about another report to complete. I don't remember kids ever being mentioned.

Terry: Wow. I guess a lot has changed. Things like our new teacher evaluation system have helped me turn the focus to kids.

Joe: Yes, I know a lot has changed. I have always been in this district, as a student, teacher and now assistant principal. I never saw the willingness to have the conversations that we are willing to have now. We are having conversations about data and the beliefs behind data, people's mental models and some of the baggage. I know that graduates from all nine years of the program are ready to step up and have that conversation with me. It is really about student centered leadership; what is best for kids is not always what is best for teachers.

Terry: I totally agree. I really can't see the shift because I wasn't here, but I do think we have become a sub-culture. We share values and have connections. I think there is even jealousy about us. The strong bond we share creates fear outside.

Shelley: Leadership in the district is definitely different now, but we still have a long way to go.

Joe: Well, if you look at what is happening with kids, there is not a lot to argue about when you see principals from the program being successful. I have an administrative team that is composed of graduates of the program, the principal, three assistant principals and a current program participant. The speed that we arrive at decisions is pretty serious. If teachers come up against our values of kids first, it is pretty serious. We take quick action. This makes for tumultuous days because we push back on those who aren't making decisions for kids. We need support from central administration and are seeing that support, and it's empowering.

Terry: I agree about the urgency. All of us have this drive and we are not willing to wait. As one of the facilitators would say, “This train is leaving this station and you are either willing to get on or we will leave you behind.” This can create days full of conflict but it is best for kids.

Joe: Yeah, I came into a school with considerable turnover. The principal had fired 40 people. Before he came, it was a dumping ground for bad teachers. Getting people to stay and stability are good things, and the program gave us a lot of skills on how to coach people and provide support. Sometimes support might be a swift kick. At the end of the day we do care about being stable with people, but where we cut our losses is around values. If I don’t think that you really believe that all kids can learn, if I think that you might be someone who is imposing your values on kids, if kids are consistently not being successful in your learning environment, then I have to take action. The values piece is non-negotiable.

Terry: It is a balance between creating a positive school culture and looking at what is best for students. If we share a belief that every child can learn, then every adult can learn. My current thinking is that it is the growth rate that matters. I believe that every adult can learn, but I don’t have the time for poor teachers to practice on another 100 children until they get it right. I don’t have the time to wait, and if you are sleeping in the classroom you need to leave, and if you are not doing your job, you need to leave.

I hire for potential and what matters is their ability to grow. You can’t teach the values and the beliefs for teaching. I look for a belief about student learning and support the skills for teaching.

Joe: Yeah, right now I’m struggling with pressures of competing priorities and what is the most important piece to work on. I guess we have to get used to always working behind. The courageous conversations are those things that we never can have enough practice with—confronting issues of race and poverty—in the program we practiced a lot with that, but I don’t know if you ever can get enough practice with that.

Shelley: It is different being on the district side now. The good thing is that the district wants you to keep having those courageous conversations. When I started, principals were getting in trouble when the district was getting calls from families or union grievances. We have a long way to go, but I think since there are now close to 150 of us, and we are being successful, that change will happen.

This is a representative conversation of four dialogues among program graduates from each of the nine cohorts. The data were coded and revealed themes about values and actions: urgency, student focus, confrontation and data. These themes are the distinguishing features of program graduates and led to the district's proposal to the Wallace Foundation to build a leadership pipeline to support these values and actions.

The results from the dialogues were compared to the email responses of program practices that were identified by program graduates as making a difference in their practice as school leaders. The pedagogical practices of open frame, leadership labs and project revisions were identified as the practices that had the greatest level of impact on their leadership values and actions.

Open Frame

All program graduates talked about the importance of values and the integration of values into discussions and demonstrations of leadership within the program challenged their thinking and created a bond between all graduates of the program. The program explicitly values leadership for social justice and high expectations for all students and uses these as the lens of analysis for participant reflections and descriptions of actions. The process of self assessment and reflection became a habit through a ritual, open frame that occurred at the beginning of each class. Participants met weekly for a six-hour class with one hour devoted to learning from each other through sharing their work experiences and reflections on actions. Each class began with the prompt—"Is there anything that you are sitting with that you would like to share for the good of the group?" This open time allowed authentic issues to emerge and become "live" cases for feedback and analysis. Participants would share struggles and triumphs that they had experienced with students, parents, teachers, supervisors, staff, etc. These replays of action offered them a time to hear multiple perspectives and make value connections in a safe space. One graduate stated: "When we brought issues to the table in open frame, it was always brought back to student centered leadership and what is best for kids" (Jerry Adams, personal communication, September 10, 2011). Graduates report that they looked forward to this time and wished that they had opportunities to do this with colleagues as they practice their leadership in their formal roles as principals and assistant principals. Being able to share their difficulties without fear of judgment or breaches of confidentiality was a highly valued practice.

The consistent practice of opening every class with an open frame seemed to lead to the "crystallization of values" that graduates "draw on at any time when I make an important decision. I often talk to my teachers about my value of clear and honest communication" (Sally Adams, personal communication, December 19, 2011). The program's focus on leadership for reform requires that graduates are able to tackle difficult issues.

One graduate stated, “I saw in my year in the program that leading from this place of values was imperative. The many hard conversations I have hosted in my 2.5 years of reform work would not have been possible without this foundational approach of the program. I also make all data public, even comments from the staff about my performance. Much of this was extremely negative my first year and by making the data public we were able to move forward” (Nathan Vonn, personal communication, October 20, 2011). Graduates shared that the expectation of open and honest communication, focus on values and the resulting trust that developed within each cohort promoted a “sub-culture with connections, shared mental models and beliefs” (Terry). After nine years, this sub-culture is shared with over 130 program graduates within a district with almost 200 schools.

Leadership Labs

One requirement of the program was that each student had to design a “leadership lab” which was a simulation that allowed them to practice their leadership skills in the class environment. The students were required to identify an area in which they struggle or were fearful, i.e. dealing with angry parents. They designed scenarios and the faculty and their colleagues helped them role play the experience. After the simulation they received feedback on their actions. Graduates reported that this experience helped them apply leadership tools and become more confident in dealing with difficult situations: “I’ve been able to begin the change process within my current situation rather than learning what should happen” (Jim Barlow, personal communication, October 15, 2011).

Leadership labs provided practice to frame conversations and engage in confrontational dialogue. Participants are able to see and feel the dynamics of conversations and replay action to develop skill. One graduate stated, “The leadership labs helped me experience how important it is to be heard and to receive feedback. I honestly don’t think I would have learned this without these experiences. I used to roll my eyes and make judgmental comments without ever asking questions or listening” (Carla Hass, personal communication, November 3, 2011). Being “on stage” clearly demonstrated the importance of planning and framing conversations.

Project Revisions

The pedagogy of the program reflected many elements of the realities of the work of principals rather than typical practices in university courses. For example, the predictable structures and assignments (schedule of readings, papers, etc.) of university courses do not simulate the uncertainty and ambiguity that principals face when leading schools, nor do they model the practices we want principals to use as they design differentiated professional development for their teachers. Participants and fac-

ulty customized projects to fit individual needs and the context of practice while providing standards for evaluation. This practice reflects the “integral relationship between knowledge and reflective action” of equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995, p. 153). Faculty and participants practice reflective self-analysis by continually examining assumptions and the alignment between espoused values and actions.

When participants submit their projects for evaluation, the faculty provide feedback against the established criteria and ask probing questions that encourage deeper reflections. The questions challenge student’s assumptions and ask them to consider gathering more data or engaging more voices before action. Participants must address all questions and feedback provided through another submission of their work. This opportunity to “revisit” their work through the feedback of others is an example of equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995, p. 155) and has greatly improved the quality and depth of work. It has also been recognized by participants as somewhat unique and personally meaningful and helpful to their growth as critical thinkers and leaders. One graduate reflected, “Many times I received a project back with the question, ‘Is there something that you should do first?’ written in the margins next to my description of leadership moves. Invariably, the facilitator was referring to my lack of surveying an important stakeholder group prior to making an important decision. Even today, if something goes awry in my leadership practice, I can almost always pinpoint the cause to my lack of gathering information from parents or teachers before moving forward” (Dawn Hill, personal communication, August 18, 2011.)

The pace of leadership work often promotes a reactive stance with technical solutions; this practice of revisiting work forces reflection and the consideration of the perceptions of others. New skills, capacity and actions are needed for schools to become able to meet the needs of all students to attain proficiency on standards. It is apparent that in order for schools to change so that all children are given the knowledge, skills, time and opportunities to learn technical solutions (solving problems that can be addressed through current knowledge) will not be sufficient. However, there are many barriers to adaptive change and the leadership skills needed are different from those that influence technical change (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003).

Learning involves the awareness and correction of error, and when things go wrong people have a tendency to look for a strategy that is compatible within their mental models and/or the rules of the organization (Senge, 1990). Argyris and Schön (1978) call this reactive process single-loop learning. Another way to approach problems is to examine and question the existing mental models and practices through double-loop learning. Single loop learning often occurs in a typical process of grading work that students submit; however, double loop learning is promoted when thinking is challenged and work has to be revisited and recast through the feedback of others.

Contribution to the Field

The stories of participants within this successful leadership preparation program revealed high impact practices and behavioral indicators of the development of an empowering leadership stance. Shulman's (2005) definition of professional education is reflected in the inquiry pedagogy practiced in this program.

Professional education is about developing pedagogies to link ideas, practices, and values under conditions of inherent uncertainty that necessitate not only judgment in order to act, but also cognizance of the consequences of one's action. (p. 19)

He promotes a pedagogy for professional education that supports aspiring leaders as they "engage in practice" with "a sense of personal and social responsibility" (p.18). To optimize this learning, the context of the profession and the preparation of professionals should be interconnected and enable generative knowledge development. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted a ten-year study to understand how aspiring leaders are prepared for practice in the professional fields of law, engineering, the clergy, teaching, nursing and medicine. One result of this study (Shulman, 2005) was the conclusion that professional education is

... a synthesis of three apprenticeships—a cognitive apprenticeship wherein one learns to think like a professional, a practical apprenticeship where one learns to perform like a professional, and a moral apprenticeship where one learns to think and act in a responsible and ethical manner that integrates across all three domains. (p. 3)

Many preparation programs utilize coursework, workshops, case studies, and internships to provide learning experiences that simulate or approximate the work of school leaders. These preparatory experiences promote the development of knowledge, skills and dispositions but their position outside of the practice and context of an authentic leadership role does not approximate an apprenticeship. The practices of open frame, leadership labs and project revisions allow aspiring leaders to engage in cognitive, practical and moral apprenticeships. The structures for facilitation allowed faculty and participants to question and examine the social, cultural and political issues of school leadership in the district context. Values were the lens and frame for analysis and the generative learning practices integrated the cognitive, practical and moral apprenticeships.

This study identified specific learning experiences and facilitation practices linked to participant-reported impact of these experiences and practices. These findings contribute to school leadership program development, pedagogy and evaluation. The landscape of leadership preparation is about to collide with the accountability movement as leadership

preparation programs will be evaluated by the performance of their graduates. It is time for university preparation programs to examine and rethink their practices through the lens of impact and effectiveness. The practices of open frame, leadership labs and project revision recast teaching as a collaborative inquiry process where students and faculty are “legitimate knowers and knowledge generators” who are engaged in a “reciprocal and symbiotic” process within a field of educational practice that is “relational, theoretical, practical and political” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 89).

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